



MARY KENDRICK BENEDICT

*The Sweet Briar Alumnae Association is proud to send you this tribute to Mary K. Benedict, written by her devoted friend, Connie M. Guion.*

*Who but "Dr. Connie" could have written this account of Miss Benedict with such affectionate understanding of her as a person and as Sweet Briar's first president?*

*Many of those who have always regarded themselves as "Miss Benedict's girls" also knew Dr. Guion, when she taught chemistry at Sweet Briar, from 1908 to 1913. Still a practicing physician in New York, and a member of the faculty of the New York Hospital - Cornell Medical College, Dr. Guion is also a member of Sweet Briar's Board of Directors and serves as chairman of the Board's Development Committee.*

*It is very gratifying to tell you that your scholarship in memory of Miss Benedict now totals \$18,771 and continues to increase as additional contributions are received from the many alumnae who wish to have a share in this memorial to Sweet Briar's beloved first president.*



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*Sixth Annual Meeting, held:  
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 the following was unanimously passed:*

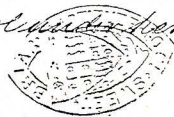
*Whereas it seems proper that at the close of  
 the first session of this school some expression  
 should be given by this Board to its appreciation  
 of the services of its President:*

*Now, Therefore, Be it Resolved*

*That the Board desires to place on record its apprecia-  
 tion of the untiring devotion which D. Benedict  
 has shown to the interests of this school, the good  
 judgment she has exhibited in the recommenda-  
 tion of the members of its faculty, and the patience  
 and ability with which she has dealt with the  
 many perplexing problems that have confronted  
 her.*

*That Sweet Briar Institute is fortunate in having  
 at its head a woman of the character, ability and  
 learning that characterizes its President, and the  
 Board expresses its confidence in the successful  
 development of this school under her guidance and  
 direction.*

*A. M. Randolph*  
 President.



*Arthur P. Gray*  
 Secretary

## MARY KENDRICK BENEDICT

In the spring of 1907 Mary Benedict went to Vassar College in search of teachers for Sweet Briar College in Virginia. Though it was less than one year old she had envisioned already the plans for its development. She did not visualize another Vassar, nor a replica of any other college then in existence. She had determined to build an institution in Virginia that would fit into the spirit and needs of the South. She would design a pattern of education that incorporated the principles of learning that best prepared students for the art and science of living their everyday lives. She had been president of this new college not yet ten months but her plans were formulated. They were based on the problems which had confronted her there.

She realized that most girls from the South had neither the desire nor the preparation to enter college. It was her ambition and determination to provide the necessary foundation for admission to college and during such preparation to foster in the student an interest in further education and reveal to them the wider horizons it would provide. She fully realized that, during the beginning years, for financial reasons, every student who applied must be admitted if possible. She knew that seventy-five per cent would be sub-freshman material and that courses must be available to meet their needs. She had planned to classify the group as "special" to distinguish them from the college students. She looked forward eagerly to that day when every student would belong to the college classes but in the meantime she was devoting her energy to training "specials" to become freshmen.

She emphasized her problem as being three-fold: first to get students to teach; second to obtain teachers to inspire them; and third to provide this two-fold type of curriculum to educate both secondary and college students.

She explained the situation that existed at the moment—only 55 students, still unclassified and including but few of real college grade. It was evident that each of these girls was an individual to her with very vivid potentialities and problems. They lived in two dormitories, ate in a central refectory and worked in an academic building. The faculty was small but excellent and commanded her confidence. She was determined to maintain and improve its caliber. The Board of Directors supported her in all her plans and ambitions but they had an exceedingly small endowment with which to operate.

She spoke of the farm—its problems and assets; of the loyal and unfailing devotion and interest of the staff who served the college in the buildings, in the kitchen, on the grounds and farm. She described Miss Indie, little Daisy, the old homestead, the boxwood circle and hedges and all of the glories of the springtime that she had just left.

The group of faculty that sat around the dinner table were fascinated by her story. Miss Fisk said she thought this mother and child were dead and this college a memorial but evidently she was mistaken for the three of them seemed to be having a glorious time planning this college. To which Miss Benedict laughingly replied that she was right on both counts for Miss Indie and Daisy seemed to be there always working along with her.

This group of faculty, President Taylor and all who heard her story were astonished that this young president saw the future of this new college with such clarity, confidence and enthusiasm. They admired her courage, her wisdom and intellectual grasp of the educational problem in the South, especially as she had had no previous experience there.

She left such an imprint on the minds of the college administration that Sweet Briar was the subject of discussion at faculty meetings. As a result, a few years later Sweet Briar students were admitted to Vassar College with full credit for each course offered—as I remember

the first girl transferred in the fall of 1911. As much as Miss Benedict regretted losing a college student, she rejoiced that a Sweet Briar freshman had become a full fledged Vassar sophomore. All the college felt that "Sweet Briar had proven her academic strength—she had arrived."

In the spring of 1908 the head of the Department of Chemistry at Vassar College recommended me to Miss Benedict to teach inorganic chemistry at Sweet Briar. I wrote her for an interview for which she made an appointment in New York City, stating I would be expected to teach also physics and algebra. In talking to her I emphasized my ignorance of physics but hastened to assure her that I was certain I could prepare at Cornell summer school to teach the course satisfactorily. She looked squarely at me a few moments and then said, "Are you sure? If you fail you will have seriously injured your career as a teacher. If you succeed you will have gained equal maturity and power." She thereupon offered the job to me. The interview was over in twenty minutes—neither of us had said an unnecessary word. As I was taking leave, she noticed my lip was dirty and so remarked. I laughed and told her the dirt was only a cobweb which I had put there to stop my lip from bleeding. I explained that I had cut it on the egg shell when I was sucking a raw egg for lunch. Thereupon all of her shyness and reserve was replaced by a burst of laughter and a display of her keen sense of the ridiculous and her interest in the individual. She had to know where in New York had I found a cobweb and how I knew how to use it. Her parting remark to me was, "May be at Cornell they can 'learn' you some new method of stopping bleeding."

In the fall of 1908 Miss Benedict took me to the chemistry laboratory and walked around it with me and said that she would ask Mr. Davis, the former chemistry teacher, to come up and explain everything to me. She then said as she left that I would find neither the equipment nor the space I had at Vassar but smiling she added,



"You will be much freer to use your ingenuity! When you are ready come to my office so that I may discuss your plans and program with you."

This was typical of Miss Benedict. She gave you a suggestion and depended upon you to proceed from there. She entrusted a job to you and left you alone to execute it but she never failed to extend to you the assurance that she was ready always to help you. When your job was done she congratulated you for every good aspect of it and gave you constructive criticism where called for. She made you feel her interest was in your personal success as well as in the welfare of the college. Her understanding, frankness, gentleness, and encouragement inspired you to greater effort. If you took a problem to her, she never gave you a solution but you found that she was leading you through mental gymnastics by which you answered your own question. If yours was the type of mind that evaded her method of reasoning, you would feel frustrated, disappointed and disgruntled and perhaps conclude that she was diffident, uninterested and cold. You might come out of her office and say to the first person you met, "Well, that was a half-hour wasted. I went in and asked Miss Benedict whether I should do this or that. I talked to her a half hour and I have no idea what she thinks I should do. I did all of the talking." If the listener knew Miss Benedict she would reply, "Go home and think over what you said to Miss Benedict, then make up your own mind as to the best thing for you to do. Tomorrow go back and tell her your decision and ask for suggestions. You will come out next time full of new ideas."

No, Miss Benedict was never diffident, disinterested or cold. She was reserved, shy — painfully shy — and her method of dealing with problems was unconsciously psychoanalytical. She had in her no palaver, no superficiality, no insincerity, no guile. Accordingly she found formal conversation, mingling with strangers and chit-chat a very embarrassing experience.

With students, their parents, and beaux, Miss Benedict

felt at complete ease at all times. They felt her warm and genuine interest, they responded to her sparkling eyes and merry laughter and sensed her selflessness in her interest in them. She studied each application and knew every detail in it before a girl arrived on campus. She personally had planned the program for each one with a view to interesting the student in learning and in preparing for college. She would modify it to fit the girl when necessary. Her influence over the students was an interesting study and entirely unconscious on her part. It was due primarily to her type of mind, her psychological reaction to a situation as it affected the student and the college. She believed that the student functioned best when she was at peace with herself and content with the college. On this philosophy she rarely refused the request of a girl or forced her into any course of action. Instead she skillfully led the girl to think out her problem and come to a rational decision whether it involved some trivial matter or some important question.

Students sensed her devotion to their welfare, her interest in their "play," be it dramatics, athletics, May Day. She knew their beaux and greeted them by name with some pertinent comment about their colleges. She loved the formal dances with all the beautiful girls in lovely dresses, the music, dancing, and general atmosphere of happiness. Ruth Maurice (1914) once said to her, "Miss Mary, I don't know who is having the best time at this dance, you or us girls". She laughed and joked with them and when the boys asked her for a dance, she invariably replied, "Not this dance, but next time." She never tired watching them dance, flirt and have a gay time. She was vastly proud of their morale which kept the tone of their parties above reproach.

The code of behavior set for their dances was but a part of standards for their college. It was a striking characteristic of the student body as a whole that they held the reputation of the college as a personal trust and guarded it loyally wherever they went. In their student government association, their by-laws and regulations

were based on the principle "It must be for the best of the college." They formulated and administered this association from the beginning of the college. Miss Benedict advised and supported them but she never directed their decisions. The students felt she understood them and consulted her freely.

At times when infringement of the rules made discipline necessary, Miss Benedict approached the individual as a psychoanalytical problem. She usually succeeded in leading the student to work out her own solution of the underlying cause of her error and reestablish her self-respect and her position in the community. The result made each girl have unlimited faith in Miss Benedict's wisdom, justice and personal interest.

This interest in the student as an individual led Miss Benedict to acquire an unusual knowledge and insight into each student's life. She was therefore ready to help each one and to understand the waves of public opinion among them and to bring order into any type of unrest. She was always determined that life be as full and happy as was compatible with the welfare of the person as a member of the group.

She was well aware of the important part that athletics played in the morale and health of the college. As soon as the warm days brought on an urge to swim she and Mr. Dew would go to the Lake with the girls and sit in the boats with an eye out for the inexperienced swimmer. On more than one occasion they held out an oar to some frightened girl. She herself was a tireless swimmer and would float or tread water with ease.

Tennis, basketball and hockey she felt must be provided for; she encouraged the interest of Miss Plaisted of the Department of English, a Bryn Mawr athlete, to coach these games. Often she was on the field during match games and twitted the college teams when they were beaten by the "Specials." As soon as the budget permitted, a director of athletics was added to the faculty.

As Miss Benedict was conscious of the physical and

academic needs of the college, so she believed firmly in the necessity of religion in daily life. She believed in daily chapel as an occasion when the college joined together in spiritual communion and worship. She felt that it lifted each one out of a self-centered, self-sufficient existence into a mood of self-searching realization that no one was an all powerful individual. This same spirit led her to begin every meal with a silent grace — silent that each might express in her heart and mind her own thanksgiving in her own way. Because of her deep feeling she provided early for the chapel in Manson and for a resident minister as professor of religion. She looked forward to the day when a lovely chapel would fill in the quadrangle, flanked by Grammer and Randolph. She envisaged the chapel hall on the level of the roadway and the offices and class rooms of the Department of Religion opening on the meadow below.

Miss Benedict, the scholar, was well known in the academic world as the creator of a very remarkable college in the South. She was known to be a person of rare intellectual capacity; an honest, just, dependable educator and administrator. The Board of Directors of the college found her to be a quiet, shy, determined, fearless, direct president with ideas so well founded and jelled that they could not resist her requests. When she proposed that the term "Institute" be replaced by "College" on the seal and all the literature issued by the college, the lawyers were adamant against it. She stood firmly on her advice and finally had her way. So it was when Mr. Manson reported to her that the treasury of the college could not meet the teachers' pay roll. She replied that these salaries must be paid strictly on time if the college was to retain the respect of the faculty and to maintain their respect for her word as president. Mr. Manson straightway obtained a personal loan to meet the crisis. Mr. Manson was on the campus weekly and learned from close observation that she spent wisely, saved discreetly, never wasted. He knew that she discriminated among those things that were necessary, those that were advisable and those that were



luxuries, be they financial, academic or recreational. He considered her mind quick but never superficial, judicial but never dictatorial, analytic but never destructive. He laughingly said that she was the only person he knew with a memory for facts and faces better than his own. They had a mutual confidence, admiration and affection for each other and each felt security in their love and loyalty to the college.

Because of the reputation of Miss Benedict and Sweet Briar at other colleges and at teachers agencies, she was successful in maintaining a faculty of unusual ability and varied training and teaching experience.

With members of the faculty she used the same technique of approach as she did with students, but with less success. Her shyness was a handicap and the adult mind was more fixed. Or it might be far less ready to think a problem through and come to a plan of action. She was always prepared to discuss work or personal questions with everyone and make suggestions but she would never make a decision for anyone. She would help the person see the principles and facts involved and their relationship; their effect on the person and on the rights of others. She then left the individual to make her own decision with the sure knowledge that Miss Benedict would hold her least confidence inviolable. Sometimes a member of the faculty felt frustrated at the end of such an interview because she had not been given a definitive answer to the question "What shall I do?" If she had the wit to think over the conversation constructively and impersonally she would find the answer because Miss Benedict never failed to bring out all angles of the question for honest appraisal.

One of the early, most colorful, and brilliant members of the faculty was Miss Helen Young, head of the Department of Music. She always had a problem and a ready answer and she said she never went to see Miss Benedict without coming away a wiser woman. They both loved music and fostered plans to develop the best possible instruction in piano, voice, or violin. They were

enthusiastic over the choir, the glee club, and the participation in college life of the members of the music department. When Miss Young decided that Daisy's music box was unsatisfactory for the dancers in the dell she went to Miss Benedict in despair. Miss Benedict straightway appealed to Mr. Martindale and up came a wagon drawn by Black Bessie. The Sweet Briar House piano was lifted into the wagon and off to the dell. To the amusement and delight of the Department of Music the piano rolled into the dell for every May Day dance rehearsal.

The most difficult task Miss Benedict ever faced was making public appearances. Her voice was soft and low, without volume, and carried poorly. She always said it "froze" in her mouth because she had stage fright but not because she had forgotten her lines. In fact, she wrote her speech succinctly, in beautiful English, early and speedily. She quickly learned it word for word and used no notes for her memory was flawless. When she spoke she never hesitated but she could not bring forth her words with any transmission. She knew this and was therefore even more ineffective.

She was aware of the importance of publicizing Sweet Briar among the secondary schools, especially in the South. She knew it was important to accept the many invitations for her to speak to women's clubs, in schools, and at association meetings all over the South. But she felt totally inadequate to do so successfully and she seemed unable to force herself to undertake this work. Instead she sent Professor McBryde and Dr. Rollins to make the contacts necessary to increase the enrollment of students and to stimulate interest in college education for women. This situation distressed her sorely but after discussing it in detail with Dr. Grammer she made a final decision against attempting any kind of formal public relations. This included appeals for financial support for the college. She was firmly convinced that fund raising was the function of the Board; hers was the administration of the internal affairs of the college.

The devotion of Miss Benedict to the development of the college included every aspect of its life. She felt a heavy responsibility for the safety and welfare of the students. At any hour of the night you could look out on the campus and see a spot of light darting here and there like a fire-fly. As you watched you could distinguish a tall figure wrapped in a long cape slowly walking about the buildings. At times she would stand still to examine a small planisphere to locate some particular star — she knew them all well.

She functioned as dean, registrar and president with the able assistance of her beloved secretary, Marion Peele. She worked until the wee hours of the night alone in her office at the Sweet Briar House with windows and doors wide open. She slept there alone without fear, often in her Cape Cod hammock on the second story balcony.

One day, as she was walking with a friend along the cedar path to the academic building she heard the college ram come rushing across the lawn. She saw him with head down, coming furiously at her friend and warned her to give him a blow in the head with her suit case. Next he backed away and charged full tilt at her. She had a folded umbrella in her hand and with this she miraculously caught the ram between the eyes. Forcefully she parried him ahead of her until she was opposite a small cedar tree. She darted quickly behind it; the ram backed off and charged at her again and again but she skillfully beat him at his game and kept the tree between them. Soon a goodly crowd stood at a distance, cheering her prowess. She was enjoying the fight immensely when Mr. Martindale came on horseback and rescued the ram. She liked nothing better than a contest with a superior adversary!

Many people have wondered why Miss Benedict studied medicine. Twice a year, at least, Miss Benedict saw her girlhood friend, Dr. Katherine Raymond. As young girls these two had planned to study medicine but Miss Benedict was unable to follow her ambition for financial reasons. Miss Raymond did and eventually be-

came resident physician at Wellesley College. Often Miss Benedict visited her there and kept in close contact with her throughout Dr. Raymond's life. She followed her work with the Wellesley students and became convinced that a medical course would enable her to be a more intelligent president of Sweet Briar College. Dr. Raymond encouraged her in the project but the final decision was her own and hers only.

As I have said, Miss Benedict did not anticipate severing her connections with Sweet Briar College but rather she planned to continue her work on a more effective level.

For the first ten years after she left Sweet Briar she did not return to the campus but she knew the course of events intimately. Through the insight and the cordial invitation of Miss Glass she was induced to return to the campus and made to feel that the place was hers. She recognized Miss Glass as a kindred spirit, admired her as an educator, as a person, as an able and devoted president of Sweet Briar. Miss Glass in her own inimitable way broke through Miss Benedict's shyness and reserve, showed her an affection and admiration which Miss Benedict returned enthusiastically.

At the time of the 1945 celebration, Miss Benedict appeared in a strictly tailored hat which she proposed wearing to Lynchburg to a dinner party. She slapped it on her head as Miss Glass entered the room. Horrified, Miss Glass exclaimed, "Mary Benedict you can NOT wear *that* hat." She left for a moment and returned with a chic little black model which she carefully adjusted to Miss Benedict's head, stepped back and said, "Now that presidential model brings out the real beauty of the first president." Miss Benedict surveyed herself critically and with a merry laugh she agreed. Thence until she left for her train she wore the presidential model.

Through the hard work and loving labor of Martha von Briesen, Helen McMahon, and Marion Peele, the campaign to found the Mary K. Benedict Scholarship



Fund was launched in October 1944. With the warm support of Miss Glass, and of friends and former students and faculty from 1906-1919, this fund was raised and presented to the college on Founders' Day in 1945. On this occasion all of her dreams came true and the heart aches of all who had grieved over her leaving Sweet Briar were healed as by magic. At last was recognized her genius in planning the future college, her unswerving execution of these plans and the imprint of her own intellectual ideas and ideals upon the character of the college. The overwhelming demonstration of love and admiration on that day never faded in Miss Benedict's memory and she looked forward with pride to the next decade.

In the years at Sweet Briar we often walked to the monument when the day's work was done. She would sit quietly looking out over the hills, the farm, the college, and picture the day when 500 young girls would be learning at Sweet Briar. She would visualize each building as it rose into its place, the full expansion of knowledge that lay ahead. Always she would have in mind the ideal Miss Indie had written into her will in her lonely years—to give to succeeding generations of young women the preparation for life which had been denied her little Daisy. Miss Benedict had a spiritual feeling that she had assumed responsibility to carry out this will when she had accepted the presidency of Sweet Briar. I always felt that these three—Miss Indie, Daisy and Miss Benedict—were partners in a venture that could never fail. I still believe they are invincible.

When we would leave the hill she would look back at the quietness and beauty and comment that she would be content to rest there in peace when life was done.

The college was an integral part of her entire being through her selfless service covering ten hard years. It so remained throughout the ensuing forty years as shown by her continued study of its growth and development. Her final ambition was to return to join in the celebration of the golden anniversary. Her face shone with de-

light when I gave her Mrs. Pannell's message saying the college would send an airplane or ambulance to bring her to the college in June 1956. She put forth every effort to accept the invitation.

When I last saw Miss Benedict she talked of the golden anniversary, of her pride in the growth of the college and of her faith in its future. It was characteristic of her that all of her emphasis lay, not on its past and her part in it but on the necessity for always enlarging our vision for the years just ahead and pressing forward to the completion of our plans for the immediate future.

Mary Benedict quietly slipped into a life beyond man's concept on February 10, 1956. Her spirit, her humility, her justice, sincerity, selflessness and brilliant work will always be a living power in this Sweet Briar College that she created out of a clear vision, a keen mind, and a determined will. She, Miss Indie, and Daisy will always be as alive here as the eternal beauty of the hills.